Charities and the welfare state after 1948

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Although many working in charities had long called for greater state involvement in welfare provision, the welfare state challenged charities on a fundamental level. Some charities were directly taken over by the state: the NHS absorbed voluntary hospitals. The welfare state also entrenched the interwar 'mixed economy of welfare', where welfare was jointly provided by local government, charities and individuals. The care of older people was a case in point. Although local authority responsibilities were extended in the 1960s and 1970s, voluntary organisations continued to provide laundry services, 'meals on wheels' and recreation clubs. Other charities encountered the belief that there was no need to donate money or time to charities. By the 1960s, the welfare state had become a major funder of charities, either by outsourcing existing work to them or by providing short-term funding to pioneer new initiatives, which might be adopted by the state. Whilst this provided new revenue streams, it meant that project funding was increasingly vulnerable to the vagaries of state budgets and the prevailing political will.

Yet it would be incorrect to see the welfare state as hampering social action. The vast majority of pre-welfare state charities survived the 1940s, with many still functioning today. The key to survival lay in charities' willingness and ability to adapt to their new circumstances. Some voluntary groups found it necessary to reframe their activities to meet new needs. Toynbee Hall, a settlement house in East London, found itself forced to change its programme, moving away from a pre-war concentration upon adult education towards working with groups whose needs were increasingly not covered by the state: older people, new immigrant communities and ex-prisoners. Yet some of its activities – such as free legal advice – were more popular than ever.

Although free legal advice had been provided by charities since the 1890s, demand took off during the war and grew in the postwar period. The Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) was formed in 1938 to provide rapid advice and support to those affected by the war. Such work continued to grow after the war as people increasingly found the welfare state harder to navigate. This included helping people to assert their rights to benefits, but also protecting them from mistakes arising from incorrectly completed forms or generated by computers. The welfare state was not always the saviour it was intended to be. In 1965 sociologists Brian Abel-Smith and Peter Townsend made the startling discovery that state benefits had failed to move the poorest families above the poverty line. This prompted the establishment of the Child Poverty Action Group, who supported needy families whilst lobbying the government for change. Other 'single issue' groups, such as Shelter, were founded from the 1960s to challenge other deficiencies of the welfare state.

The welfare state on the one hand enabled many Britons to experience better living conditions than ever before; on the other, many still slipped through the net. The welfare state was no benign entity, often causing social problems through overlooking emergent needs or

the difficulties faced by those who found it difficult to negotiate. Whilst the deficiencies of the welfare state created new opportunities for charities, it also shaped the ways in which they worked through the operation of grants and service provision. Thus the welfare state was a mixed blessing for charities and voluntary organisations, irrevocably changing the world in which they operated.